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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether middle-school students who identify recreational reading as a hobby obtain significantly higher reading achievement scores than those middle-school students who have not identified recreational reading as a hobby. Subjects, 55 students in grades 4, 5, and 6 at the Earle Elementary Public School located in a predominantly low socio-economic neighborhood, completed a hobbies and interest checklist. Five students who identified themselves as recreational readers and five students who did not identify recreational reading as a hobby were randomly selected and had their reading achievement scores from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills compared. Results indicated that recreational readers in grade 4 had higher reading achievement scores than students who were not recreational readers. Results also indicated no statistically significant differences in reading achievement scores for recreational and nonrecreational readers in grades 5 and 6. Recommendations include: (1) primary grade students should be read to by their teachers daily; (2) silent sustained reading should occur at the beginning of each school day; (3) school staff members should be offered a professional development program to explore the influence of recreational reading in reading achievement; and (4) a parent education program that will guide them in how to nurture and support reading by choice should be implemented. (Contains nine references and one table of data.) (RS)

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# What is the effect of recreational reading on reading achievement of middle grade students?

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Perhaps the greatest demand on elementary school teachers and students in the classroom is the development of a variety of reading skills. The dramatic increase in an assortment of strategies, methodologies, textbook series, and computer assisted programs have flooded the market with instructional reading materials. While some products are designed to employ the "back to basics" approach, others boast in being new and innovative.

Certainly the acquisition of reading skills is central to the theme of educating our youth to meet the rigorous standards of mandated state goals. Demonstrating competency and preparation for citizenship in the twenty-first century is also one on the national educational goals. In an emerging fast-paced age of information, it is imperative that members of our society, including those who are disadvantaged, actually read rather than just be able to read. Plato said, "What is honored in a country will be cultivated there" (Morrow, 1985). Since literacy is honored in our society, merely teaching children how to read in not a sufficient objective for literacy education.

How do we effectively establish a foundation for recreational reading? How do we nurture and stimulate young children to become lifelong learners through reading for knowledge and enjoyment? At the present time there appears to be a lack of current research on recreational reading programs that involve an emerging population of urban youth at-risk with respect to its effect on reading achievement. Given the proper information, urban school educators can make proper decisions about investing in a comprehensive reading program.

Instructional leaders, teachers, parents, and local school councils need to know if students participating in a reading program, which has a component that addresses the development of an interest in reading, will benefit by their improvement in reading achievement as well as within an integrated curriculum. This foundation , as part of the educational process, will extend from early childhood to higher education and beyond.

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A sizable number of Americans are aliterates. Aliterates are people who can read but choose not to. Voluntary reading as a habit should be promoted early in a child's life. Voluntary or recreational reading means that children, by their choice, engage is sustained silent reading (SSR) or reading related activities which include: looking at picture books, listening to and telling stories, as well as reading and reciting poetry. It further includes reading informational pamphlets and brochures, newspapers and magazines. During SSR children and possibly other school personnel read silently and simultaneously for ten to



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thirty minutes. The purpose of SSR is to ensure that this period of reading time that has been provided for the whole school remains quiet and uninterrupted.

In 1979 results of a study conducted by Cole and Gold on American book reading habits showed that 45% of Americans were not book readers. A later survey on book purchasing in the United States showed that 60% of American households did not buy even one book during a one year period between 1990 and 1991.

Morrow and Weinstein (1982) found that very few on the primary children they observed chose books during their self-selected activity time. Greaney (1980) discovered that during leisure time activity of fifth grade students only 5.4% of them spent their time reading. (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, Teale, 1993)

Beyond the common belief that voluntary reading is desirable, there is evidence of a connection between voluntary reading and school success. Studies of children in kindergarten, primary and middle grades who have demonstrated a voluntary interest in books were not only rated to have better work habits, social and emotional development, language structure, and overall school performance but these children also scored significantly higher on standardized reading tests.

Jerolds, Benton, and McCutcheon (1975) aptly stated

> We have hundreds of thousands of people who have the skills to read and do not read. We have legions of children who have the intellectual potential to learn to read, but who resist the instructional process. At least partial answers to these two problems can be found if we became more skillful and knowledgeable concerning the measurement and modification of attitudes toward reading and reading instruction (p. 33)

Standardized test scores show achievement levels of vocabulary and reading comprehension. They cannot however provide information regarding the student's attitude toward reading. One way to assess a child's attitude toward reading is through the use of self-reporting measurement techniques. Recognizing the need for a valid and reliable self-reporting group diagnostic reading attitude assessment, Dreydan(1982) developed such and instrument. It was designed to measure, within a school setting, the instructional and recreational attitudes of children. The subjects for this research project were 634 children in grades two through five from various ethnic groups and residential areas. The Diagnostic Reading Attitude Assessment included thirty-six items categorized into two subtests. The Instructional Reading Subtest included items on: 1) Reading Aloud; 2)Reading Groups; 3)Reading Seatwork; 4) Taking Reading Tests; 5) Reading Workbooks; and 6) Teacher Instruction. The subtest on Recreational Reading included items on Library Recreational Reading and Classroom Recreational Reading.

During the assessment, the examiner reads each of 36 items twice. Students respond by marking happy, sad, or neither happy or sad, as a written response to each item. After data were analyzed, three items were deleted that had weak intercorrelations. Various studies were conducted to determine validity and reliability of the instrument. Subsequently teachers could see each child's profile and identify positive and negative reading attitudes towards motivational and recreational reading.

Along the continuum of reading attitudes there are students who when given access to the school library, will be able to find a book to their taste. At the other end however there are a number of students who "successfully resist all attempts to interest them in recreational reading". Allan and MacDonald (1971) conducted an experiment over a five month period on a top second year high school class whose reading attitude was apathetic. Library periods at their school had a straining and frustrating time for the librarian in that a disappointedly small number of students were interested in taking home books. For this reason it was decided to drop the school library periods and try a different approach to voluntary reading. All Scottish novels had been removed from the library shelves and placed in the classroom. The students were informed that they would participate in a special project in which their task would be to read a book then complete a hand made booklet identifying requested factual information, their comments on its readability and personal rating ranging from outstanding to dull. English periods were devoted to this project. When one book was completed, another was offered immediately.

The finished product consisted of a list of a review of sixty books with an average of 12 books read by each reluctant reader. While the primary aim was to stimulate reading for pleasure, this project succeed in that there was an upsurge in interest, although the number of books read inevitably declined as time passed. From this study two distinct advantages were cited. Offering limited but varied selections in the classroom setting minimized the confusion of multiplicity of choice. Classroom teachers are better able to monitor what students are reading and how long it takes him or her to complete a particular book.

Fractor, et.al. (1993) have shown that research of the past decade clearly links the importance of classroom libraries to increased literacy activities. Well-designed library centers enable children to interact more with books, demonstrate more positive attitudes towards reading, choose reading as a leisure time activity, spend more time reading, and exhibit higher levels of reading achievement (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988).

Educators like Atwell (1987) contended that what students need more of is not testing but daily opportunities to read, write and discuss the books they are reading (Cox, 1993). Voorhess (1993) has reported the outcomes of integrated activities designed to improve student attitude toward reading in a middle school reading program. The program focused on four key activities: 1)SSR; 2)journal writing; 3)computer activities; and 4)reading incentives. Outcomes were measured by comparison of student pre and post attitude surveys, teacher observation of books read and recorded, and participation in the reading club. Results indicated that students viewed reading as less important than

watching TV, listening to music or participating in sports and hobbies. Nonetheless students today are reading when they are able to choose what they read rather than what adults feel they should be reading.

A similar study was conducted by Witry (1989) for fifth and sixth graders at school serving a public housing development in a large Midwestern city. Sixty-five subjects spent one class period per week selecting their own books, reading them, making a presentation to their class and then maintaining written assignments in a student log or computer database. Results of student surveys indicated that all students developed a more positive attitude toward independent reading, they each read at least ten books throughout the school year and they became more familiar and knowledgeable in library skills.

A significant factor in the development of a positive attitude towards reading is directly linked to an early exposure to books and being read to by parents. In a study conducted by Bobel (1981) to determine the attitudes and preferences of thirty-eight intellectually gifted intermediate grade students toward their recreational reading habits, the following findings were cited. Forty-seven percent of the subjects spent one to four hours reading whatever they wanted. Thirty-eight percent felt they did not have enough time to read due to homework assignments. Fictional book preferences were humorous books and non-fictional book preferences were sports, crafts, and hobbies. The subject of most disliked fictional books was war. The subject of most disliked non-fictional books was world problems. Eighty-nine percent of the students belonged to the public library. In conclusion, two of four of the hypotheses were supported by data. Greater than ninety percent of the subjects read pre-primers before entering first grade. The major source of instruction for the subjects would stem from their parents. Data indicated that there was no wide variance in the number of hours the children spent reading recreationally. The final hypotheses which stated that there would be no difference between the children's preferences in types of reading matter was not supported nor rejected.

Emphasis by reading authorities on reading matter does not automatically entice students to read. It is the teacher who must translate expert advice into practice. A teacher's survey by Mangieri and Corboy (1981) has cited some concerns on their knowledge of children's literature. A questionnaire was given to a wide range sample of 571 elementary school teachers and administrators. The purpose was to determine their knowledge of children's literature and their recreational reading activities. The three items teachers responded to were: 1) Name three children's books written in the last three years. 2) Name a children's book written in the past seven years in each of the following areas: fiction, biography, poetry, fantasy/science fiction, picture books, and mystery/adventure. 3) Name three or more activities which promote recreational reading on the part of children. The correctness of answers in parts one and two was determined from the annual compilations of "Children's Books in Print". For question three their responses were compared with those suggested in literature by reading authorities.

With regard to question one, 91% of the respondents could not name three books written in the past five years. Seventy-one percent could not list even a single book. Few

teachers did well in their response to question two that asked for books in six different categories. In the third section, 89% of teachers could not list three or more activities that would promote recreational reading. The most popular responses however were reading stories to children, SSR, and designing or acting out plays.

The researchers had two questions in mind as they initiated this study. They wanted to determine what elementary educators know about recent children's books and the range of recreational practices being employed in their classrooms. Their findings indicated the following. The majority of elementary school educators are not staying abreast of children's books. The respondents were deficient in the knowledge of the ingredients of a balanced literature program. If teacher's are not aware of suggested practices, recreational reading must have a low priority in the classroom.

How do student's feel about their recreational reading program? Moore (1994) developed a study that observed and interviewed ten disadvantaged fifth grade students who participated in an after school recreational reading program. High mobility rate, extrinsic motivation needs, assigned reading rather than self-selected "meaningful" reading, the format of silent reading which was considered "boring", and lack of positive adult influence all had contributed to low interest in reading and low reading achievement.

This researcher, who reviews federally funded programs that demand accountability and gains in standardized test scores, decided to utilize a more naturalistic approach to the subject of evaluation of this recreational reading program. Primary interest here was the students perceptions of the program structure. A second interest later emerged which was understanding the student's feelings toward certain reading materials and how they best learned to read.

Subjects from this study attended an urban neighborhood school surrounded mostly by low income housing. Two parent families are rare and unemployment is high. The school serves as a neighborhood base and offers many free or low cost programs to residents in the area. Chapter 1 sponsored the after school recreational reading program as well as other programs. The researcher felt that students at this age and grade level were more open and less biased in their opinions. Three ethnic groups were represented. Questions were designed to help the researcher focus on the observational process. Students were usually observed in the library while under the supervision of two or three adults including teachers, teacher aides, and parent volunteers for thirty to fifty minutes. A second set of questions were developed for use in the student interview process. Interviews lasted from fifteen to thirty minutes. Student responses generated the order of questions. Student language often revealed a lack of sophistication in overall language development, a prerequisite to the development of reading skills.

While space does not permit the printing of all interviews, some salient ideas will be cited here. Friends stay after school to read, so it is good. Students know that because of the rules it may be necessary to read aloud to their parent for verification of reading at home. Credit is given for reading assignments at home based on their parents signature. In spite

of being willing to read for rewards, students indicated that questions were seldom asked of them by adults in charge of the program or by parents at home regarding what they had read. They further indicated that they felt they could bluff their way through it at times because nobody really cared if they actually read or not. Student found it boring that they did not share the joy or reading books with their own peers because of the "Be Quiet" rule generally enforced in the school library. Students felt reading would be more fun if someone read to them something that would make them laugh a lot. "Nobody want to be in the last (reading) group. Just dummies are in the last group." It also appeared that for many of these students reading outside of the classroom would not have occurred at all had it not been for the fact of a tangible reward.

The subject of extrinsic rewards has been debated by researchers. Lepper and Greene (1974) have noted that if the child does not possess the basic skills to discover intrinsic satisfaction in reading, the use of extrinsic rewards may be required to equip him or her with these skills The question has been raised if the use of rewards would be the same if a similar study were conducted in a more wealthy suburban school.

Implications of literature review for this study have suggested a perceived need of the educators in this school to provide students with rewards in order to encourage them to participate in reading programs designed to promote reading as well as to maintain the increased reading time in order to improve reading skills. It is further considered imperative that the those who consider themselves significant in the role of promoting the value and importance of reading both in and out of the classroom make a favorable impression and communicate an unspoken message that reading is important.

Reading requires practice in order to achieve fluency. Practice should be easy enough to allow the child to experience success and enjoyment so that one will read more by choice. Typically, the kind of reader a person is going to be throughout life has been established by the sixth grade (Bloom, 1964).

Literature on research relating to the effect of recreational reading on reading achievement seemed inadequate. The available literature seemed to suggest that recreational reading does increase reading achievement due to the extended opportunity to practice acquired reading skills. The literature also suggests that in many instances programs designed to increase reading did not sustain gains in student interest.

Available literature spans the last two decades and involves students who are atypical of current urban school populations. As a result, in many respects we are comparing different methodologies and different subjects which lead to dissimilar conclusions. The effect of recreational reading on reading achievement will be more valid and reliable when we study the impact of an at-risk generation. Further research needs to be done in this area. What is the effect of recreational reading on the reading achievement of middle grade students?

Middle grade students who identify recreational reading as a hobby will not have obtained significantly higher reading achievement scores than those middle grade students who have not identified recreational reading as a hobby.

## Procedures

The population for this study will include 231 students in grades four, five and six. The students attend the Earle Elementary Public School which is located in a predominantly low socio-economic neighborhood. The population is racially identifiable as minority students.

A parental consent letter explaining some details of the study was distributed among the population of eighty-one gifted students in the middle grades Fifty-five students had permission to participate in the research project. For these students a ten-item Hobbies and Interest Checklist was developed for them to mark all recreational interests they presently pursued A Recreational Reading Interview Questionnaire was developed and piloted on 10 seventh grade students who were not included in the study. After revision, the eleven-item oral interview was conducted individually with five randomly selected students who identified themselves as recreational readers in the given grades Other data was obtained from five randomly selected students who did not identify themselves as recreational readers in the given grades. Reading achievement scores from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) were obtained from school records to be used in this study. The ITBS was administered near the end of the previous school year.

The findings will be tabulated in terms of means and standard deviations. The t test will be employed at the .05 level of confidence to determine if there is any statistically significant difference between the mean scores.

## Findings of the Study

The samples for the study included fourth, fifth, and sixth grade gifted students at the Earle Elementary School. Each spring students take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). From these middle grade gifted students a determination was made to identify those who were recreational readers and those who were not recreational readers. A random sampling was made of five students in each category at each grade level. Results from the 1995 ITBS reading comprehension subtest were used to define reading achievement. A t test was done on these six sets of scores to determine it there was a statistically significant difference in reading achievement between those who were recreational readers and those who were not recreational readers. Table I summarizes the statistical analyses.

Table I

Means, Standard Deviations, and t Tests for the Experimental Group and Control Group for Reading Achievement Scores

| | Experimental N=5 | Control N=5 | t |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade 4 | | | |
| M | 3.5 | 2.2 | *3.25 |
| SD | 0.31 | 0.91 | |
| Grade 5 | | | |
| M | 5.3 | 4.6 | 1.14 |
| SD | 0.85 | 1.1 | |
| Grade 6 | | | |
| M | 6.6 | 4.8 | 1.71 |
| SD | 2.2 | 0.9 | |

df = 8 p > .05
*Significance at the .05 level

Examination of the 1995 ITBS scores indicate a difference in mean scores between the Experimental group and the Control group as follows: grade four 1.6; grade five .7; and grade six 1.8. Further examination identifies the range for the grade four E-group as 0.9 and C-group 2.5; the grade five E-group as 2.3 and C-group 2.8; the grade six E-group as 2.3 and C-group 2.4.

The t scores at grade five, $1.14 < 2.306$ and grade six, $1.71 < 2.306$, are statistically insignificant at the .05 level of confidence. Recreational reading has had no significant impact on reading achievement of these students. At grade four, however, t scores of $3.25 > 2.306$ are statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence.

Overall, the data leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis at grades five and six: students who have identified recreational reading as a hobby will not have obtained significantly higher reading achievement scores than those students who have not identified recreational reading as a hobby, as well as acceptance of the research hypothesis at grade four: students who have identified recreational reading as a hobby will have obtained significantly higher reading achievement than those students who have not identified recreational reading as a hobby.

In this study more follow-up research is needed as concern continues to mount over public school reading achievement. The review of literature has indicated that it seems appropriate to promote voluntary reading from the time that children are very young to ensure that the benefits of such efforts persist in their later lives. Reading improvement programs that have been introduced at the middle and upper grade levels have indicated a definite upsurge initially followed by a subsequent decline in interest in reading.

This study might have resulted in different findings if the researcher had more control on method of data collection and the population had been significantly larger, thereby allowing more control of the extraneous variables.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact recreational reading had on the reading achievement of middle grade students. Students who identified recreational reading as a hobby were strongly opinionated and did not appear to have been diverted easily from their favored interest to other leisure activities. Research has suggested that television and electronic games will not interfere with voluntary reading habits if they are formed early in life. While this study favored the promotion of recreational reading, findings on the achievement of the majority of students who identified recreational reading as a hobby and those who did not identify recreational reading as a hobby were statistically insignificant.

Conclusions

The results of research findings indicated that children identified as voluntary readers in elementary and middle grades demonstrated high levels of reading achievement. Research findings further indicate that for older students, a new interest in reading is unlikely to be sustained to the degree that it leads to higher achievement in reading. The results of this study, appear to agree with the research findings in the review of literature. The review of literature featured populations of middle and upper grade students. Students at these levels have usually mastered basic reading skills and have a level of maturity that is essential to participate in a project that will benefit others.

Implications

In effect, many adults are aliterates also. Perhaps it is because so many young children are taught to read through a skill-drill-teach-test approach. Perhaps it is because of the

quality of children's literature to which students have been exposed. Perhaps it is because students have limited opportunities to practice reading skills with self-selected reading materials. Perhaps students have not had integrated reading instruction. Perhaps students have not seen reading materials displayed attractively. In any case we must go beyond reading instruction that teaches abstract and isolated concepts to conceptualization and meaningful reading early on.

The results of this study suggest that many educators are unaware of research findings on recreational reading and its relationship to reading achievement. Ongoing professional development indicates the need to investigate best practices for effective delivery of services to students.

Recommendations

1. Primary grade students should be read to by their teachers daily in order to acquire the appropriate language structure, vocabulary, background knowledge, and sense of story structure that will correlate with subsequent success in learning to read.

2. Silent sustained reading should occur at the beginning of each school day for the entire school population. Students need the opportunity to observe their peers and adults silently reading for enjoyment.

3. Classroom library centers should be well designed to entice students to self-select reading as a preferred voluntary activity. Visibility, space, comfort, display, and variety are all characteristics that are significant.

4. Offer a professional development program for school staff members that explores the influence of recreational reading on reading achievement. Current and available research findings may be shared. A determination can be made of how to align new strategies with mandated goals, learning outcomes and classroom lesson plans and student instructional needs. Knowledge of children's books according to genre should be encouraged.

5. Allocate resources to purchase a variety of reading materials for the school library. In light of the developmental differences in students across grades, collaborative planning could establish the criteria for levels of basic, good, and excellent libraries.

6. Implement a parent education program that will guide them in how to nurture and support reading by choice , not coercion. Parental involvement in the modeling of positive attitudes towards reading for pleasure, care of books, discussions of what has been read, and regularly reading to their children is essential to the establishment of a community of readers.

7. Recommendations for further research:
    a. larger sample/population
    b. inclusion of upper primary students in the population
    c. longitudinal study of the younger research subjects
    d. inclusion of data on teaching styles

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